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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by the Global Network for Rights and Development (GNRD), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[14 February 2016]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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UNHCR Statement on Climate Change

Mr/Madam President,

The Global Network for Rights and Development (GNRD) welcomes this opportunity to address the Human Rights Council on the continuing efforts to address the serious issue of climate change and its intrinsic connection with global human rights. The struggle to protect our environment has been a long uphill battle, and as the urgency of the crisis becomes ever more apparent, there has never been a more appropriate time for immediate and decisive action.

We would first like to state that we are pleased that the international community has begun to take major steps to address and fight climate change. We commend the adoption of the first legally binding climate change agreement, reached at the recent UN Climate Change Conference in Paris, which represents an admirable level of cooperation and a landmark effort to seriously combat rising emissions.

While it remains to be seen how well individual states will meet the proposed targets- as compliance with international climate agreements has historically been an obstacle, even amongst our closest friends- the Paris Agreement paves a path for coordinated and transparent action with substantial funding for initiatives in developing countries. With carbon emissions falling by only 1 percent last year, we have no choice but to urgently escalate investments in renewable energy and carbon sequestration.

At this point, however, the potential environmental costs of climate change failure are repeated often enough, and we are dismayed that the human costs are widely overlooked. GNRD finds it deeply disappointing that both sections on health and human rights were omitted from the legally binding sections of the Paris Agreement. The inextricable link between climate change and human rights has been well documented by this council, and the lack of consensus from states to address serious threats to basic rights is immensely concerning.

John Knox, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment, noted in December of last year that "every State in the climate negotiations belongs to at least one human rights treaty... governments do not check their human rights obligations at the door when they respond to climate change." Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights clearly states that health is a fundamental human right, and includes a clear responsibility for state parties to take steps to improve "all aspects of environmental and industrial hygiene." States have a responsibility to ensure food security, clean water, and safe air.

Moreover, we believe that it is imperative that states' policy address the irrefutable and disproportionate effects of climate change on vulnerable populations such as women, the poor, and indigenous communities. Particularly in developing countries, irregular weather patterns and droughts have disrupted agricultural production, while extreme natural disasters have devastated communities and proliferated diseases.

This has both directly and indirectly contributed to major shifts in migration flows around the world. In East African countries like Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, for example, where up to 90% of inhabitants depend on agriculture to survive, unpredictable temperature shifts have led to a surplus of poor migrants moving north to attempt smuggling routes into Europe.

GNRD firmly believes that a comprehensive climate change strategy must focus on mitigating the inevitable impact on human rights. Collective responsibility and action means not only addressing the need to achieve net zero greenhouse emissions, but also working to ensure that those already affected by climate change receive adequate protection and support.

We believe that despite being confronted with a serious and dangerous challenge, this point in history is an opportunity to radically catalyse our efforts towards true sustainable development. It will not be easy, but with substantial investment in renewable energy and a commitment to strong public health regulations, states can choose protect both our people and our planet, and transform the future of our society.